DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 391 751 SO 025 979

AUTHOR Niblack, Rita A.
TITLE Art Criticism: A Whole Language Approach to Art.
PUB DATE Apr 95
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the National Catholic Education Association's Annual Convention and Exposition (92nd, Cincinnati, OH, April 18-21, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Art; *Art Criticism; Art Education; Art History; Elementary Secondary Education; *Whole Language Approach

ABSTRACT

For centuries societies have understood the importance of art in relationship to other disciplines. Many great artists were also writers and poets. Many artists were well educated in classical literature from which they drew inspiration for paintings and sculptures. The document argues that the obvious meeting place for the two disciplines of art and language is the field of art criticism. Here students may combine art and whole language skills. In four sections this document: (1) reviews the tenets of whole language philosophy; (2) argues that art is a whole language that holds the same tenets as whole language; (3) explains art criticism as a system or model for talking about art in a whole language way; and (4) provides an exercise in art criticism. The document contains brief models of art criticism, a list of resources, and seven references. (MM)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

# Art Criticism:
# A Whole Language Approach to Art

by Rita A. Niblack

ED 391 751

For centuries societies have understood the importance of art in relationship to other disciplines. Many of the greatest artists were also great writers and poets. (Michelangelo is a good example.) Many artists were extremely well educated and used their extensive classical literary backgrounds as the source of subject matter and the inspiration for their paintings and sculptures. (Rubens, Rembrandt, Turner and even Picasso demonstrate this.) Art and language are inherently related.

To me, an obvious meeting place of the two disciplines of art and language is the field of art criticism. Art criticism is talking and writing about art. Here is a place where our students can do art in a whole language way. Furthermore, art criticism is a necessary part of art instruction, and provides a vehicle for the classroom teacher who may not feel adequately trained to teach art.

My talk today has four parts. First, I would like to review the tenets of whole language philosophy. Next, I want to convince you of the fact that art is a whole language and therefore holds the same tenets that whole language does. Third, I would like to explain what art criticism as a system, or model to talk about art in a whole language way. Finally, we'll try out those ideas by actually doing some art criticism together.

## I. What is the whole language philosophy?

Whole language is a philosophy which stresses the following ideas about language:

A. The whole comes before the parts--i.e. whole meaning is more important than the individual components (i.e. individual sentences, phrases, etc.).

B. Oral <u>and</u> written language are emphasized. One learns to speak and to write by listening and by reading. One learns to read by being read to and by writing.

SO 025979

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Rita Niblack
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

C. Tasks the students are given should be authentic, rather than isolated exercises. By authentic we mean that it is relevant to the students' lives. Children write books about themselves, their families, events with which they are familiar. Students learn to spell words that are in the literature they read, or are necessary to the writing they do. Long lists of verbs to conjugate, nouns to make plural, or sentences to punctuate correctly, of themselves don't have any relevance to the student.

D. The goal of whole language is that all children become skilled learners of language. Language includes writing and reading.

E. Language skills are acquired in the process of using language, not in an isolated way (i.e. exercises which you look for subjects, nouns, etc.)

F. Words have meaning in context of literature, rather than on an isolated word list.

G. Writers create meaning in the process of writing.

## II. How is art connected to language?

### *A. Art is language.*

Art has a meaningful and powerful message to communicate. The artist uses an artwork as a vehicle for communication. Just as a writer uses the written words or a storyteller uses oral words to communicate a message, the artist uses brushstrokes, colors, lines, shapes, composition to convey his or her message. The vehicle is different, but the process is the same. In writing or reading, details and description in the form of words lead the reader to the meaning of the story. In an artwork details and visual description lead the viewer to discover the meaning of the artist. Whether a writer, a storyteller or an artist, the goal is the same--to communicate something to the audience.

*B. Art is the earliest form of language.*

Art is the most ancient of recorded languages. Before people wrote letters and words they wrote pictures which describe meaning. These pictures were perceived without grammar or correct spelling but as ideas.

Writing developed from pictures. Egyptian hieroglyphics are the best example of this. Sumerian cuneiform and even Japanese calligraphy seem to be based on some earlier pictures which were stylized and simplified to what we call letters.

*C. Art is the wholest language.*

Today we still use pictures to communicate whole meanings. I don't know how to speak or understand very much German, so when I was in Germany in a train station and I needed to find information about my train, I did it by drawing a picture--not of nouns and verbs and adjectives with conjunctions, but with a picture, which conveyed my meaning in one intuitive grasp. Whole language philosophy suggests that this is the way people should learn to read. Art has always been used in this way.

Because art is usually taken in, in one view, it conveys meaning wholly, not in parts. It is nearly impossible to consider the parts without the whole. Whole language instructors would like students to read first as a whole, then through the parts. 'Reading' artworks is the first stage of reading. A child reads the story by looking at the pictures before he or she ever knows how to decode the letters to make words.

*D. Artworks can be understood on a variety of levels.*

Just as a reader can gain more meaning, by delving deeper into the parts, by discussing, by analyzing, so, too, with artworks. Their message can be perceived on deeper and deeper levels by delving into the parts of the artwork, analyzing them, and relating them to the whole.

*E. Art making and talking about art fit all of the criteria that we've just discussed about whole language.*

A. *The whole comes before the parts--i.e. whole meaning is more important than the individual components.*

We've already said that artworks are conceived of and perceived as a whole unit, before they are viewed in parts.

B. *Oral and written language are emphasized.*

We as art educators have long believed that reading artworks and making artworks go hand in hand. That is why artists visit galleries and view each others' works--to see what others have done as stimulation for their own imaginations. As ability in interpreting artworks grows, so does ability in art making. Just as speaking and hearing language are a boost to reading and writing language.

C. *Tasks should be authentic or relevant, rather than isolated exercises.*

There is no reason for students to learn how to make brush strokes or lines or blend colors, except to make art. Learning how to do the components of art is almost always done in the context of making an artwork--not as an isolated incident. Artworks are by nature meant to describe the lives or society of the person who makes them. Artworks are made to express something of the artist, therefore are always relevant to the artist.

D. *Whole language has as its goal that all children become skilled learners of language.*

Art certainly has as its goal that all children become skilled users of the language of art. This means a proficiency in speaking the language (making art) and in reading the language (understanding and interpreting artworks).

E. *Language skills are acquired in the process of using language, not in an isolated way.*

We, as artists, don't learn how to talk about artworks, except in front of an artwork. We learn how to say what needs to be said, to understand what needs to be understood about a work in front of it. We also learn how to make art in the process of making it, not outside of that context. That is why the next tenet also makes sense to artists.

F. *Words have meaning in context, as opposed to on an isolated word list.*

Brush strokes, lines, colors, shapes don't have meaning outside of the context of the artwork. A stroke of green may be a part of a tree, or a young girl's dress, or a shadow down the center of a face (if you're Matisse). By itself, it means nothing.

G. *Writers create meaning in the process of writing.*

One of the things that I think is the most exciting about art, is the fact that art happens in process. Even artworks that are planned ahead of time, still happen in process. Because we as artists are trained to watch for the unusual and to be stimulated as we make art. We are always ready to alter or to change, when the unexpected brush stroke gives us a new idea or a new way of looking at our work. The whole meaning may change, in process. Isn't that what whole language philosophy says about writing-- that the meaning happens in the midst of making it?

I hope by now I have convinced you that art is whole language. If what I am saying is true, the next step is to explain how to unite the two disciplines in the exercise of art criticism.

## III. What is art criticism?

A. According to Feldman "Art criticism is talk--spoken or written about art." (I.e. it <u>is</u> language.) Art criticism begins with viewing an artwork (either a famous work from history or a work by a student). Students are encouraged to talk about the artwork based on what they see in it. In the process of talking the viewer reads and interprets the artwork.

B. It is a <u>guided</u> way to grasp the meaning and the message of the artwork. While art criticism can be very spontaneous, it is most effective if one applies a method. Students can grasp the message of the artwork more thoroughly and at deeper levels if one progresses in a logical sequence through the details of the artwork. (In reading a story we encourage a <u>guided</u> approach as well. One reads for meaning, but the nuances of meaning are teased out as one deciphers the meaning of individual words and their relationships.)

C. It is part of a larger approach to art --Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE). This is the approach developed by the Getty Foundation which advocates that art instruction must include art history, art making, art criticism, and aesthetics.

## Some models for art criticism

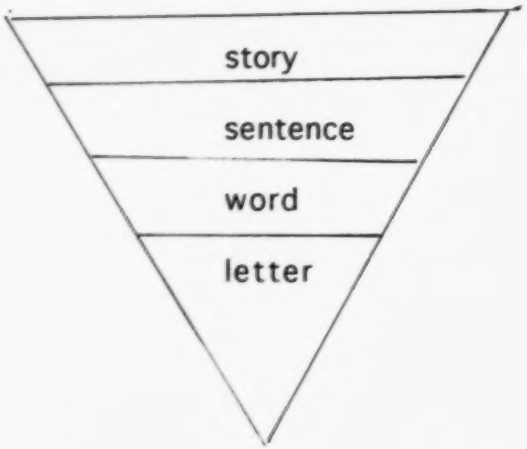
There are many models which are given to you on your handout. All contain some way of examining the artwork (describing what is seen) and of interpreting the artwork (telling what it means). Other aspects which are often included are evaluation of the artwork (assessing its success as an artwork), and examining the historical context of the work.

The Feldman model for art criticism is the best known. It begins with a description of the artwork. ("There is a red circle at the bottom of the picture.") Then an analysis of the relationships of the parts. ("The red circle seems to be closer to the viewer because it is a warmer color, because it is lower down in the picture.") Next Feldman suggests that we interpret the artwork. ("The red circle is a red ball being bounced by a girl, who is walking along the beach at night. The girl is alone and she is lonely. The single red ball shows her isolation from other people.') Finally, there is judgment of the work. ("I like it because of the great sense of depth." "I didn't like the color combinations that were used.")

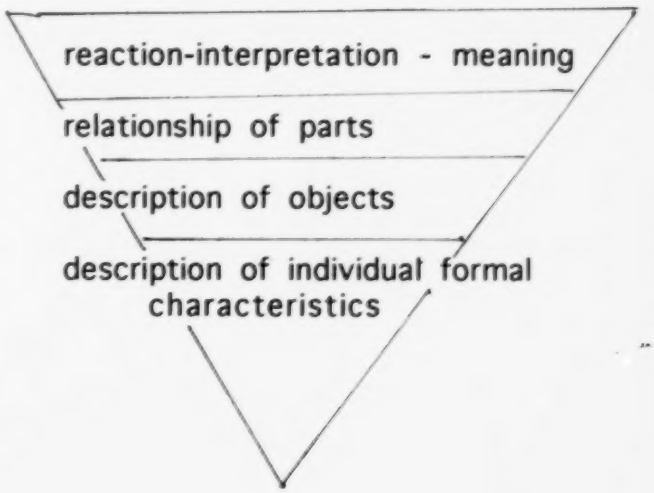
On your handout you have an inverted triangle which exemplifies how one should read according to whole language philosophy. One starts with the whole-- the story, then perceives in terms of smaller and smaller parts, i.e. the sentence, the words, the letters. The order is from highest to lowest or from largest to smallest part. The fact that the triangle is inverted indicates that in this model the most important, or largest aspect is not only first, but pervades or overshadows the other parts. The main part of the story --the meaning--overshadows and covers all the other aspects of reading.

I have created an art criticism model to correspond with the whole language reading diagram. In this model, the meaning, the message or the interpretation of the artwork is the whole which overshadows the parts. In this case, the parts are the context of the work (when was it made, by whom, for what reason), the relationship of the parts (the composition, the relationship of the colors, brushwork, lines, shapes) and the smallest part which is descriptive (what colors are there, what kinds of brushstrokes, lines, etc.) I want you to notice that in this model the meaning or interpretation overshadows all else that the viewer observes. In both language and in art, the meaning is the overriding concern.

WHOLE LANGUAGE READING MODEL




ART CRITICISM 'READING' MODEL



Interpretation is the most important part of art criticism.

It is the part which makes the artwork relevant to the student. It is the purpose of the artwork (i.e. to communicate a message). It is the part of the work that give relevance, that makes it authentic. It is the reason for the artwork. If the reason for making art is to communicate a visual message, then the importance of the work lies in the reading and receiving of that message. Just as the value of the book is in reading it and comprehending the meaning, not in the way it decorates your desk or your bookshelf.

Terry Barrett, from Ohio State has compiled a list of guidelines for interpretation. I would like to draw from that list to help you to understand more what interpretation is.

1. Artworks demand interpretation. We've already said that that is the purpose for which the artwork is made.

2. Responsible interpretations draw on the strengths of the work, not the weaknesses. It's not fair to look at works of art to criticize only.

3. Interpretations are arguments, they need to entail premises which lead to conclusions. They are also persuasive. If I interpret an artwork, I am trying to convince those I am speaking with of my view of the artwork.

4. No single interpretation is exhaustive of the meaning. This means that every student in the class may have a different interpretation of the work you are viewing, yet each have a convincing nature to the interpretation. That is because we each respond to an artwork from our own background. That is the beauty of art and literature. It has meaning for each and every person in his or her own way. It is unique for each individual. It is one size fits all. Also, interpretations are not right or wrong, but more or less 'enlightening', 'original', 'insightful', etc.

5. Good interpretations tell more about the artwork than the viewer. While our interpretations have to do with ourselves, they are ground in the work of art. The basis of a good interpretation is the work of art itself. An interpretation is less convincing, the less it is connected to the artwork.

6. Good interpretations have coherence, correspondence and inclusiveness. By coherence we mean that it holds together, it doesn't contradict itself. By correspondence--it matches the details of the artwork. By inclusiveness we mean that all the major aspects of the artwork are dealt with by the interpreter.

7. Interpretations have to do with feelings, intuitions, and thoughts.

8. An interpretation need not match the artist's intent for the artwork. The artist did have some intent, but the responsibility for the interpretation is on the critic. Once again this is the beauty of artworks. Great artworks are not bound by time but have meaning for the time they were created and for all the times that they are viewed in.

## Examining the Context of the Artwork

The second level of art criticism is the context of the work. This is an examination of the history behind the work. It might entail learning about the life of the artist who made it. It might entail an understanding of the time era and culture of the work. It might involve discovery of the purpose of the artwork, or the materials used to make it. For instance, understanding the meaning of an icon painting of Mary and Jesus from 10th century Byzantium would certainly be enhanced by knowing the reverence with which this sacred image was treated, the miraculous stories attributed to it, the belief in it as a 'true portrait' of those portrayed. Examining the context of the artwork probably involves research, but it might be drawn from the background of the students. Their knowledge of American history might aid in the interpretation of Trumbull's "Signing of the Declaration of Independence." An understanding of the context should enlarge and expand the interpretation.

## Examining the Relationship of the Parts of the Artwork

The artwork is made up of many small parts, but it is the way they relate to each other that supports the meaning of the work. If the colors used are harsh, or if they contrast each other, this creates a certain mood in the picture. The painting that makes use of black or brown to tone down the colors may have a dull or a gloomy look to it. The artwork that has a composition that encircles the parts of the picture may be leading the viewer to look at certain things. The relationship of objects in regards to size or placement on the picture is what creates a sense of depth in an artwork. These relationships give the viewer more information and therefore add to the understanding that he or she has as to what the picture is about.

Principles which are seen in relationships include structure, space and rhythm.

## Description of the Artwork

Finally one must examine the components of the artwork. What kind of brushstrokes are used? Are they quick, spontaneous, fluffy? This might give a sense of energy to the picture. Are they concealed, smooth, rigid? They might give the artwork stability. Are the lines horizontal? Then it is a restful picture. Are they long and curvy? The sense of grace might be given by them. The smallest part of the artwork, are the building blocks which are put together to make up the artwork. They create the meaning.

Elements in an artwork include line, shape, form, color, light, texture, pattern.

## A Word about Judgment of Artworks and Relevance

Artworks <u>may</u> be judged by the viewer. Each of us has his or her own opinion of what one likes or dislikes. By the time the process of interpreting is finished, the viewer has already judged and rejudged, forming many opinions. At the end of the art criticism, it is important to go back and review, synthesize and make a final statement about the artwork. This might be a judgment--such as "I like the work because..." or "I don't think it is a very good artwork because..."

This is not always a component of art criticism. I feel that it is important, because it adds relevance to the process. It give the student an opportunity to interject a personal opinion. It gives the student the opportunity to relate the work to his or her own personal experiences. It gives the student the chance to examine his or her own thoughts about the piece.

Because each student is unique, each will have a different and equally valid judgment of the work. The judgment tells what the artwork means for a specific viewer, regardless of the interpretation of other viewers.

Our students are the consumers of the next generation. They will consume visual art in the form of movies, magazines, photographs as well as fine arts to decorate their homes. They will be making these kind of decisions in the future and therefore should be given the opportunity now.

Judgment of the art critical process.

Can a judgment be made about an art criticism if it is a matter of personal interpretation? That is, should an instructor grade the written art criticisms which students do for language arts classes? I believe that it is important to evaluate the art criticism of students. Outside of the writing and editing skills, the content of the art criticism is important. Some of the criteria that might be used to evaluate might include: inclusivity (Does the student go through all four steps [interpretation, context, relationships, components] in examining the artwork?) coherence (Does the interpretation have consistency as to the meaning, as the student goes through the steps?) correspondence (Do the points made by the student correspond to the artwork?) originality (Are the ideas presented by the student unique, clever out of the ordinary?), convincing nature (Did the student's interpretation present convincing arguments?) , etc.

As for art criticism as a verbal exercise in class, I believe that all answers should be accepted for discussion. Probing questions such as "Why do you say that?" or "What part of the picture gives you this idea?" keep the discussion coming back to the artwork.

IV. An exercise in art criticism.

A. William Sidney Mount, The Power of Music is a painting by an American artist painted around 1830. The painting shows a barn with three well-dressed white men inside. One is playing the violin while two are listening. Outside the barn is a black man in ragged clothes. He is holding his hand on one hip and leaning against the barn with one leg supporting him and one leg bent. Next to him is a jug and an axe. As I show this

My first question to the class would be one of interpretation. What do you think this picture is all about? Students responses might include "It's a bunch of people listening to music." "Some men are inside a barn." "A black man is outside the barn and they don't know he is there."

My question "Why do you think that one man is outside the barn and the others are inside?" Responses "He's a slave." "He's planning something against them." "He's not suppose to be there."

I ask "Why does the black man stay there? What is he doing there?" Responses "He's listening to music." Question: "What do you think he is suppose to be doing?" "Working." What kind of work? "Cutting wood." "How do you know?" "He has an axe."

"Where does this story take place?" No response. (Maybe the students didn't understand my question.) "Is this a football field?" "NO!" "Is it in a church?" "NO!" "Then where is this place?" "In a barn." "How do you know?" "There is hay, there is a horse stall, a pitch fork, wooden walls and floors."

"So put all that together and tell me what you think is happening." "A man is going to work chopping wood and he stops outside the barn to listen to music he hears inside."

After this initial phase of interpretion, I go to the next level which is the context.

"This painting was done in the United States in 1830 by an American artist named William Sidney Mount. What was happening in the United States during this time?" "Slavery." "Mount was a genre painter. This means he liked to paint scenes of ordinary people and ordinary events, that he saw around him. Do you think that this is an ordinary event?" "Do you think he painted a realistic view of life in the U.S. in the 19th century?" "Why do you think that people needed slaves?" What do you think it is like to be a slave?"

"What do you think that the man in the picture is thinking? How does he feel?" (This moves the information about the context back to the level of interpretation.) "He feels sad, because he can't come in with the other men." "No, he feels happy, because he is smiling." "What is he smiling about?" "He likes to listen to the music." "But he is a slave." "He can still be happy about the music."

While context could continue for any length of time, I will move on to the level of the relationships among the parts.

"Often an artist will use a specific shape to help organize the picture for the viewer. Does anyone see a shape?" "Yes, there is a square." "There are two squares." "Why two squares? Why doesn't he use just one square?" "Because there are two parts to the picture--the men in the barn, and the one outside the barn." "Why does he want them separated?" "Because that is the way they were in that time." "The artist makes a line down the center of the picture separating the two. What separates these men?" "Their race." "One is black, the others are white." "Some are the rich people, the other man is a slave." "Is there anything that unites them?" "Yes, they all like the music."

While we could delve into other aspects of the picture--the depth, rhythm, let's move on to the components.

"This picture has some light in it. Where is the light shining?" "On the outside of the barn." "Where the slave is standing." "A little of the light goes in to the barn, too." "It is dark inside the barn where the men are sitting." "What does the artist do to make it look dark?" "He uses a lot of yellow for the light and brown and black in the background where the barn is." "Why do you think he does this?" "It helps you to see the difference between the two groups of people." "It shows that the people in the barn are farther away from us than the man outside." "What do you think it might mean for the picture?" "Maybe that the men in the barn are really in the dark in their feelings about the black man." "Maybe it means that the African American is more enlightened than they are."

"Having looked at this picture and some of it's parts, would you say that William Sidney Mount is a slave owner, or an abolitionist?" "I think he is an abolitionist." "Why?" "Because he paints the slave as a person with feelings. He shows how he can appreciate music, just like the other men." "I think he sympathizes with the black man because he shows him in the light, kind of like a hero." " The slave is the one that is closest to us. He looks like the main character of the picture."

"What do you think that Mount's message is in this picture?" "I think that he is saying that music is a very powerful force. That no matter who you are, you can appreciate music." "I think that he is trying to show that all people are the same. Whether you are black or white or whatever color, certain things can be appreciated by everyone."

"Do you like the work or dislike it, and why?" "I like the work very much, because I like the message of equality." "I like the work because I like all of the realistic details, like the axe and the red scarf." "I dislike the work, because I think it has too many dark colors, but I do like the message about the music." "I dislike the work because I don't like the idea of slavery. I don't think that people should be showing pictures about it."

This exercise shows how the model works. We started off with an initial interpretation about the meaning of the work. From there we went through the steps of the model, each time referring information back to check the interpretation. We ended by formulating a final interpretation, based on all the evidence we acquired by looking at the components of the work. Then we made the art criticism personal, by giving each student a chance to judge the value that they placed on the artwork, based on their knowledge of it. I might end the exercise by having each student write their own interpretation, instead of discussing it in class.

This art criticism model works just as well with non-objective or abstract works. It is an exercise in thinking, evaluating, and reading the details of a work, to come up with an interpretation. It's the exact same skill that we are cultivating when we teach reading through the whole language method. That's why I say that art <u>is</u> whole language.

# MODELS OF ART CRITICISM

**Harry Broudy**
Technical
Sensory
Formal
Expressive

**Edmund Feldman**
Description
Formal Analysis
Interpretation
Judgment

**Donald Fehr**
Historical Context
Interpretation
Formal Analysis
Judgment

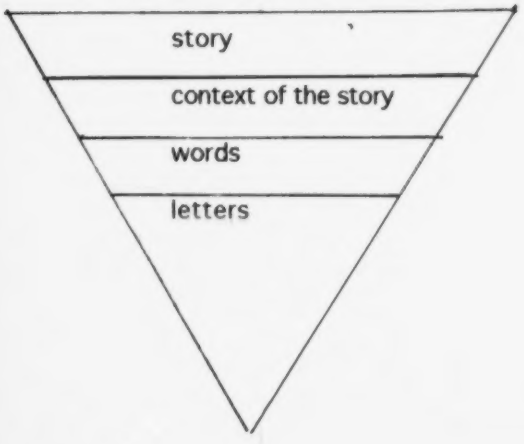
**Laura Chapman**
deductive
inductive
empathetic

**Ralph Smith**
exploratory aesthetic criticism
argumentative aesthetic criticism

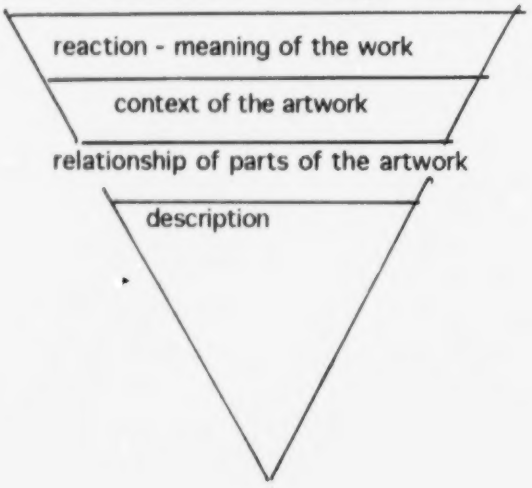
**Tom Anderson**
I. Reaction
II. Perceptual Analysis
  A. Representation
  B. Formal Analysis
  C. Formal Characterization
III. Personal Interpretation
IV. Contextual Examination
V. Synthesis
  A. Resolution
  B. Evaluation

**Bloom's Taxonomy**
Knowledge
Comprehension
Application
Analysis
Synthesis
Evaluation

**Whole Language Reading Model**




**Art Criticism 'Reading' Model**



## Resources

In order to talk about artworks, one needs to have reproductions of artworks. Here are some places that reproductions can be purchased.

University Prints, 21 East St., P.O. Box 485, Winchester, Massachusetts 01890. 5" x 8" color prints for about $.15 each

Shorewood Prints, 27 Glen Road, Sandy Hook, Connecticut 06482. A variety of large sized prints for display in the classroom. Some come in sets with a variety of themes.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barrett, Terry. "Principles for Interpreting", Art Education, (September, 1994), PP. 8-13.

Broudy, H.A. Enlightened Cherishing. Urbana Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1972.

Fehr, D. E. "Applying the Historical Context Model of Art Criticism" Art Education, September, 1994.

Fehr, D.E. "Mona Lisa's millstone: The modern gods of criticism." Art Education, (January, 1993), pp. 68-70.

Striker, Susan. "Whole Language and Art." Teaching K-8, (August-September, 1992, p. 107.

Feldman, E. "Art as image and ideal." Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. 1967.

Feldman, E. "Becoming human through art: Aesthetic experience in the school." Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. 1970.